

Wisconsin Elk Translocation: A Partnership Effort Between the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources, Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife, and Others

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Why?

- Opportunity to restore a native species to Wisconsin for current and future generations.
- Based on public feedback and a 2012 survey, elk translocation is strongly supported in Wisconsin, with 85% of respondents in favor of these efforts.
- Provide recreational opportunities through viewing and hunting for Wisconsin citizens and tourists from other states, with an expected economic boost for local economies from increased recreation and tourism.
- Introducing additional elk will provide genetic diversity to the existing herd and aid herd growth.

History

- Elk are native to Wisconsin, but were extirpated during the 1800s.
- Early reintroduction efforts in the 1930s failed; the last Wisconsin elk was killed in 1948.
- A feasibility study on elk reintroduction was commissioned in 1989, and in 1993 University of Wisconsin-Stevens Point evaluated the possibility of reintroducing elk to Chequamegon-Nicolet National Forest.
- In 1995, 25 elk from Michigan were released in the Clam Lake area in northern Wisconsin as part of a feasibility study to determine survivability and adaptability to the area. While this was not considered a true reintroduction effort, the herd has grown consistently in the last 20 years.

Today

- The current herd consists of about 160 elk in Ashland, Sawyer, Rusk and Price County.
- The state of Wisconsin and partners wish to augment the northern Wisconsin herd and establish a new herd further south in Jackson County.

Agreement with KY

- The Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources and Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife have developed an agreement that both parties will follow during the trapping and quarantine process.
- The agreement provides Wisconsin with up to 150 elk over a 3-5 year trapping period, including the trapping and transport of a maximum of 50 elk per year.
- Wisconsin and Kentucky are working cooperatively in this effort, and Wisconsin DNR staff will assist with trapping efforts in Kentucky.
- In exchange, Wisconsin will assist Kentucky financially in the development of habitat projects in Kentucky that will benefit elk and other wildlife, with a special emphasis on ruffed grouse.

Scope of the New Translocation Plan

- Goal: increase herd size to 1400 elk in the Clam Lake area and 390 elk in Jackson County.
- The elk management plan was amended in 2012 and underwent a public review process before final approval.

- Beginning January 2015, twenty-eight wild elk were trapped in Kentucky. They are now underway on their 120 day quarantine period, the first 45 days of which will take place in Kentucky. Once given approval, they will be transported to Jackson County in Wisconsin and held in quarantine until early June.
- Kentucky has an abundant, healthy elk herd of more than 15,000 animals – they will provide additional genetic diversity to the existing Wisconsin herd.
- Elk will be released on public lands in Jackson County and the Clam Lake region. In 2015, all elk will go to Jackson County.
- The DNR and partners will distribute elk more evenly across areas of appropriate habitat. This process is known as “assisted dispersal,” and is intended to speed up elk distribution to the most suitable habitat
- Research and monitoring of the current Wisconsin herd and the new elk herd will continue to inform translocation and reintroduction efforts.

Today

- Funding for Wisconsin’s elk translocation efforts is a result of partnerships with stakeholder groups, and the Wisconsin Department of Natural Resources has committed to using only funds received from partner groups.
- The current translocation effort is expected to cost about \$600,000 and to date has received over \$550,000 in contributions from the Ho-Chunk Nation, Jackson County Wildlife Fund, Rocky Mountain Elk Foundation, and various county governments and other partners.
- Currently, Wisconsin’s elk herd generates over \$200,000 of revenue per year in the Clam Lake area (according to the Cable Chamber of Commerce).
- The opportunity to provide for a further increase in economic revenue for communities near these elk herds (and statewide) is significant - larger elk herds in other states generate over \$1 million to local economies from wildlife viewing alone.
- Hunting season establishment is expected to draw additional funds for elk management and generate revenue for local economies in Wisconsin.

Moving Forward – Translocation Timeline and Details

- It is the Department’s hope to translocate a target goal of 150 elk to Wisconsin over an expected period of three to five years. If realized, these elk will be divided between the current Clam Lake elk herd and a new Jackson County elk herd.
- During each year in this initial period, our goal is that a minimum of 25 and a maximum of 50 elk will be trapped and transported to Wisconsin per year.
- Wisconsin DNR and Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife staff began trapping elk in January 2015 and completed trapping during the first week of February.
- The department worked in partnership with the Kentucky Department of Fish and Wildlife.
- We have full-time staff and rotating crews involved from Wisconsin
- Twenty-eight elk were captured during the 2015 trapping effort. It was a very efficient capture effort with few problems, all easily rectified, and no injuries or accidents.
- Captured elk were transported to a holding pen in Kentucky, where they are receiving 24 hour security, daily feeding and watering, and are undergoing tested for diseases and quarantine before beginning the trip to Wisconsin. This is anticipated to occur in late March.
- Elk will receive health assessments before and after arriving in Wisconsin.
- All elk captured in the first year will be released in Jackson County.

- Upon arrival in Wisconsin (anticipated to occur in late March), elk will be held in a 7 acre pen in Jackson County prior to release so they can acclimate to a new home range and complete their 120-day quarantine period - this will reduce the likelihood of elk traveling great distances once released.
- All elk captured in the second year are expected to be released in the Clam Lake elk range.
- Elk captured in the final year(s) will be divided between Jackson County and Clam Lake.

Addressing Common Concerns

Predation

- Although wolves and bear do kill elk, the DNR and partners are working to improve elk habitat to encourage them to spread out across the Clam Lake elk range. This will help reduce the concentration of elk in areas where they are most susceptible to predation.

Disease

- Wild elk from Kentucky will be tested for tuberculosis and brucellosis prior to being brought into Wisconsin per USDA interstate movement requirements which are in place to reduce risk of disease introduction
- The DNR is working closely with the Department of Agriculture, Trade and Consumer Protection on health testing protocol to reduce the risks to the cattle industry in state
- Kentucky's elk and deer have been tested statewide and are free of CWD, bovine tuberculosis and brucellosis.
- Elk will be tested for tuberculosis prior to release in Wisconsin.

Competition with white-tailed deer for food:

- Although elk and deer share similar habitat preferences, research has shown that having elk on the landscape does not produce negative competition with deer.

Elk/Vehicle Accidents

- Elk/vehicle accidents have occurred in Wisconsin, and this experience has helped wildlife managers and local communities adapt to this issue. Various measures can and have been taken to reduce the risk.

Crop Damage

- Wisconsin's Wildlife Damage Abatement and Claims Program also covers damage caused by elk.
- Elk can be hazed or removed if damage to cranberry beds, agricultural crops or timber becomes a problem.
- Currently, public land encompasses most of the elk range so crop damage is not a major concern.

Reduced Access to Roads and Natural Areas

- DNR has made a commitment not to close any roads or recreational areas due to the presence of elk.

Cost

- Elk program expenses currently run about \$200,000 per year. While this is expected to increase somewhat with the establishment of a second herd, increasing elk numbers also means new opportunities to help fund the program.
- Hunting license applications, permit sales and grants from partners are expected to contribute to the elk program budget once a hunting season starts.
- Increased tourism and viewing opportunities are also expected to have wide-ranging economic benefits to local communities within the elk range.